

PROGRAMMABLE POWER LEVEL CONTROL FOR A COOKING APPLIANCE

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

1. Field of the Invention

5 The present invention pertains to the art of cooking appliances and, more particularly, to a cooking appliance including a control for operating a heating element at multiple power levels for multiple time periods.

2. Discussion of the Prior Art

10 In general, establishing a selected power level for a heating element in a cooking appliance is known. However, maintaining the selected power level for the entire duration of a cooking process is not always desirable. Specifically, when cooking rice, pasta or other liquid based food items, it is often necessary to bring a liquid to a boil using an

initial, high power setting and thereafter simmer at a second or lower power setting for a prescribed period. In today's fast paced society, there is seldom time to continuously monitor the contents of a pot. Often times the pot will boil over, causing the contents to run onto the heated surfaces of a stove. Other times, the pot is left to boil for so long that the contents
5 boil away, leaving behind a charred mess.

The prior art teaches a variety of methods for providing a more convenient means of cooking food on a cooktop. One example is provided by U.S. Patent No. 5,746,114 disclosing an intelligent cooking
10 system. The cooking system includes various cooking implements, such as pots and pans, each having an associated temperature monitor. The system also includes a cooktop having a plurality of burners and a controller that is linked between the cooktop and the temperature monitors to maintain a desired temperature in the associated pot or pan.
15 While effective, this system is large, complex and expensive. In the highly competitive field of cooking appliances, increased cost and complexity can be significant, disadvantageous features.

Another method disclosed in the prior art is embodied in U.S. Patent No. 6,236,630 directed to an acoustic sensing system for detecting
20 boiling in a particular cooking implement. As disclosed, an acoustic sensor is mounted in a cooktop range and configured to detect acoustic frequencies that are characteristic of emissions resulting from heating and boiling of water. While effective to a large extent, not all cooking processes include a boiling stage. In addition, as with the previous
25 method, there are both high costs and reliability concerns with this system.

Based on the above, there exists a need in the art for a cooking appliance including a cooktop and a controller capable of establishing multiple power levels for at least one heating element of the cooktop, with each power level having an associated time duration of operation.

5 More specifically, there exists a need for a cooking appliance having a controller that can establish an initial high power level for a first time period of a cooking operation and then automatically lower to a second power level for the remainder of the cooking operation.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

10 The present invention is directed to a cooking appliance having a cooktop including at least one heating element, a control panel having at least one control element and a controller linked between the at least one heating element and the control element. More specifically, the at least one control element is associated with establishing a desired power level
15 for the at least one heating element. In accordance with a preferred embodiment of the present invention, the controller is adapted to establish first and second settings for the at least one heating element. Preferably, the first setting establishes an initial power level for a first selected time period of a cooking operation, while the second setting establishes a
20 second, lower power level for the remainder of the cooking operation. With this arrangement, the cooking operation is conducted without requiring constant monitoring by a consumer.

The cooking appliance, in the most preferred embodiment, includes first and second sets of slew buttons arranged on the control element.

More specifically, the first set of slew buttons includes a first slew button for selecting the power level and a second slew button for selecting the time period. The second set of slew buttons includes an up arrow slew button and a down arrow slew button. With this arrangement, a consumer
5 can activate the heating element and, through manipulation of the up and down arrow slew buttons, establish a desired initial heating element temperature that functions as a pre-heat process, or simply to establish an initial high cooking temperature.

Once the initial power level is selected, manipulation of the time
10 slew button will establish a desired time duration for the initial power level. Once the initial power level and initial time are selected, following similar steps, a second or final power level can be established for completing the cooking operation. If a user fails to select a second power level, the controller will preferably default to a predetermined lower
15 power setting. In accordance with the most preferred form of the invention, the second power level must be lower than the initial power level as the control will not permit selection of a higher, second power level.

Additional objects, features and advantages of the present
20 invention will become more readily apparent from the following detailed description of preferred embodiments when taken in conjunction with the drawings wherein like reference numerals refer to corresponding parts in the several views.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

Figure 1 is an upper right perspective view of a cooking appliance including a cooktop having a plurality of control elements arranged on a control panel constructed in accordance with the present invention;

5 Figure 2 is an enlarged, plan view of the control panel and the plurality of control elements of Figure 1;

Figure 3 is an enlarged, plan view of one of the plurality of control elements constructed in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention; and

10 Figure 4 is an enlarged, plan view of a control element constructed in accordance with a second embodiment of the present invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

With initial reference to Figure 1, a cooking appliance 2, generally
15 taking the form of an oven range, includes a cabinet shell 4 provided with a cooktop 6. As illustrated, appliance 2 constitutes a free-standing electric range such that cooktop 6 is provided with a plurality of electric heating elements or zones 10-14. At this point, it should be noted that, although appliance 2 is shown to constitute a free-standing range, the
20 invention is equally applicable to various other types of cooking

appliances including slide-in ranges, kitchen island cooktops, and the like.

In a preferred embodiment, appliance 2 includes an oven 20 having an interior oven cavity 22. In a manner known in the art, oven 20 has associated therewith a door 24 which can be pivoted at a lower portion 26
5 by means of a handle 28. Door 24 preferably includes a window or transparent zone 30 for viewing the contents of oven 20 when door 24 is closed. In a manner also known in the art, appliance 2 includes a drawer or bin 35 arranged below oven 20. More specifically, drawer or bin 35 is
10 adapted to be slid in and out of shell 4 in order to access an interior storage compartment (not shown) therein.

In the embodiment shown, appliance 2 includes a control panel 50 having arranged thereon a plurality of control elements 53-57 which, as will be discussed more fully below, interact with a controller or CPU 58
15 to set a desired power level for respective ones of heating elements 10-13. Control panel 50 further includes a central display 60 including a digital display portion 65, a plurality of oven control buttons generally indicated at 67 arranged on one side of central display 60, a numeric keypad 68 arranged on an opposite side of central display 60, and a plurality of
20 mode select buttons 69 arranged below digital display 65.

Reference will now be made to Figures 2 and 3 in describing the specific structure of control elements 53-57 arranged on either side of central display 60 of control panel 50. Since the structure of each control element 53-57 is identical, a detailed description of control element 53
25 will be made and it is to be understood that control elements 54-57 have

commensurate structure. In the embodiment shown, control element 53 includes a display portion 76 having an upper section 77 and a lower section 78. In accordance with one preferred embodiment, upper section 77 provides an indication of a selected power level for the associated, in this case, heating element 10 and lower section 78 provides an indication of the time remaining for operating heating element 10 at that particular power level. As shown, extending about display portion 76 is an outer ring 80 having arranged thereon first and second sets of slew buttons 90, 91 and 98, 99. In accordance with the most preferred form of the invention, first set of slew buttons 90 and 91 are associated with selecting between establishing a power level and an operating time for that power level respectively. Actually, slew button 90 serves a dual purpose in that slew button 90 also acts as an on/off switch for heating element 10. Second set of slew buttons 98 and 99 are constituted by up and down arrows respectively which permit a user to increase or decrease the desired power level or time period depending upon the current operating mode of control element 53. Finally, arranged below control element 53 is an icon 100 which indicates the heating element location associated with operation of the particular control element.

In accordance with another embodiment of the present invention, the control element can take the form shown indicated generally at 53' in Figure 4. In a manner similar to that described for the previous embodiment, control element 53' includes a display portion 76' having a power level display section 77' and a time remaining display section 78'. In accordance with this form of the invention, control element 53' includes a graphic design 79' which separates power level display section 77' and time remaining display section 78'. Extending about display

portion 76' is an outer ring 80' having arranged thereon first and second sets of slew buttons 90', 91' and 98', 99'. In a manner analogous to that set forth above, slew button 90' and 91' are used to toggle between inputting a desired power level and a desired time period, while slew buttons 98' and 99' are used to increase or decrease the desired power level and/or time period respectively. Finally, an icon 100' is provided at a lower portion of control element 53 to indicate the corresponding heating element associated with operation of the particular control element.

10 Having described a preferred construction of cooking appliance 2 and, more particularly control elements 53-57, a preferred method of operation will be set forth with particular reference to Figures 1 and 3. In order to commence a cooking operation, a user activates on/off button 90 which causes display 76 to initially display a zero in power level section 15 77 and a zero in time section 78. In accordance with one preferred embodiment, initial manipulation of either slew button 98 or 99 causes controller 58 to jump to a particular power level setting, for example 5, which is displayed in power level display section 77. Further manipulation of slew button 98 or 99 will cause the power level to either 20 increase, i.e., through manipulation of slew button 98, or decrease, through manipulation of slew button 99. After reaching a desired initial power level, a pause for a prescribed period, for example 4 seconds, will cause display 76 within time level section 78 to flash. At this time, the user can, if desired, set a time duration for the previously selected power 25 level through the operation of slew button 91.

As indicated above, after the selection of the initial power level, the user is presented with the option of setting the time duration for that initial power level. In a manner similar to that previously described, after depressing time pad 91, the user can either increase, through
5 manipulation of slew button 98, or decrease, through manipulation of slew button 99, the amount of time of the initial power level. After the desired time duration has been programmed into controller 58 and after a pause for a predetermined time period, for example 3 seconds, power level display section 77 will begin to flash.

10 At this point in the operation, the user is presented with the option of selecting a second or final power level for the associated heating element. In accordance with the most preferred form of the invention, the user has the option of selecting a lower power level such that the final part of the cooking operation will be performed at a lower power setting.
15 Accordingly, manipulation of slew button 99 will lower the power level displayed in section 77 to a desired second level. The option of operating the heating element at a second, higher level is, in the most preferred embodiment of the invention, not available. In further accordance with the invention, failure to select a second power level will cause controller
20 58 to default to a predetermined lower power level, e.g. a level 1 or 2 setting. If at any point during the cooking operation the user desires to alter the current power setting, manipulation of either slew button 98 or 99 will cause the present power level to increase or decrease correspondingly. Finally, controller 58 will terminate operation of the
25 heating element after a predetermined time period, for example 4-6 hours, if the user either fails or neglects to turn off cooktop 6.

With this arrangement, it should be readily apparent that a consumer can pre-set a multi-level cooking operation for each heating element 10-14. That is, a first power level for performing an initial pre-heat process or other high temperature cooking operation is automatically
5 followed by a second lower temperature cooking operation, such as, for example, a simmering process. In this manner, the consumer is able to perform other activities in and out of the kitchen without fear that a pot will boil over onto the cooking surface or the food will boil away leaving behind a charred mess. Although described with reference to a preferred
10 embodiment of the invention, it should be readily understood that various changes and/or modifications can be made to the invention without departing from the spirit thereof. For instance, the particular arrangement of the slew buttons, the overall configuration of the control element, and the display graphics could be readily modified without departing from the
15 scope of the present invention. In addition, control elements for the heating elements could be linked to the oven display to provide the user with a numerical or alpha/numeric indication of the present power setting and time remaining. In general, the invention is only intended to be limited by the scope of the following claims.